

AUBREY PLAZA

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*Aubrey Plaza is giving one of the most electrifying performances on television right now, and it's one that doesn't hinge on sarcasm. In her current roles in FX's **Legion** and two Sundance gems, she is poised to go from the mean girl on *Parks & Recreation* to an Emmy hopeful.*

"I like you," Aubrey Plaza says to Rachel Keller's character at the start of FX's *Legion*, her eyes wide and wild. "You've got what the kids these days call moxie."

She should know. In her role as Lenny Busker — an institutionalized drug addict turned, well, something else entirely, to avoid giving away too much — Plaza inhabits a space that's simultaneously snappy, vulnerable and terrifying. It seems like a leap for the comedian, who's best known for her world-class eye roll as April Ludgate on NBC's long running series *Parks & Recreation*, but it isn't as big a leap as it seems.

In the time since *Parks & Rec* hit the airwaves, Plaza, 32, has starred in a number of films with little in common — indie standout *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, zombie-comedy *Life After Beth*, big-screen romps *Mike & Dave Need Wedding Dates* and *Dirty Grandpa*, as well as guest roles ranging from Aaron Burr in *Drunk History* to an unhinged funeral guest and partygoer in a Father John Misty music video.

With the possible exception of the delightful *Safety Not Guaranteed*, in which she plays a disaffected intern at a magazine instead of the *Parks* Department, the roles she has chosen are worlds apart from April Ludgate. If you look closely, she's already shown us a dynamic range of talent that, for reasons unclear, still isn't as synonymous with her name as April continues to be.

This year could change that. Her latest two films, *The Little Hours* and *Ingrid Goes West*, see Plaza playing a 14th century nun gone wild and a lonesome Instagram obsessive, respectively. These roles come on the heels of a flat-out stunning performance as an "evil but delightful" villain back on the small screen for *Fargo* creator Noah Hawley's trippy take on a little-known Marvel character named *Legion*.

"I gravitate toward things that are scary and things where I feel like I don't even know if I can pull that off," she says. She doesn't choose any role based on its degree of dissimilarity from April, a character she cherishes on a show she is quick to praise. Rather, like most artists, she seeks diversity in her work, avoiding the temptation of complacency and searching for a new creative thrill. Well, there's one exception: *Dirty Grandpa*, her first major film after *Parks* ended, and thus a make-or-break moment for future typecasting.

"In my mind, I played the opposite of April Ludgate. That one was very deliberate. That was very calculated," she says. "It was funny to me when I'd read reviews about that movie and reporters would be like, 'Plaza's doing her thing again!' I'd be like, 'What? I'm half naked and grinding [on Robert DeNiro] and partying. What?' But it doesn't matter what I do. It's the tone of my voice. People can't get past it."

Near the end of her raunchy convent-comedy *The Little Hours*, Fred Armisen's bishop chides Plaza's Sister Fernanda for her many transgressions throughout the film, including her attitude, to which the nun retorts, "That's just the tone of my voice."

"I improvised that line," Plaza says with a smile. It's a joke she makes often in her own life. "I didn't think they'd keep it in the film, but [filmmaker

Jeff Baena] put that in there."

She maintains a good sense of humor about it, but she admits it does get under her skin at times. Even while playing a nuanced villain in *Legion*, not the mwa-ha-ha baddies of superhero tradition nor a Halloween version of April, a review will inevitably find similarities to her *Parks* character. No matter what she plays, somehow it's "still so Aubrey Plaza, right?"

"I can't escape my own body," she says. "I have so much to work with. In my mind, everything I do is so wildly different, so it's disappointing when I read stuff like that. I think, 'Oh, wow, I just gave everything that I could and had, and I'm still being labeled.'"

That label usually takes the form of the word "deadpan."

Plaza, a veteran of the improv and sketch comedy group *Upright Citizens Brigade*, remembers herself as shy, quiet child until middle school. A switch flipped around the time she started watching *Saturday Night Live* with her mom, and she knew acting was her end game. She never thought she'd one day be a peer of Molly Shannon, Amy Poehler, Ana Gasteyer — the SNL players who helped her fall in love with comedy.

Plucked from obscurity by Judd Apatow, Plaza was cast as a dry, sarcastic comedian in 2009's *Funny People*. That same year, *Parks & Rec* introduced her to an even wider audience as a dry, sarcastic intern, a character she actually culled more from the personality of her real-life sister Natalie. From there, it stuck.

Being the sarcastic comic was never her "thing." She didn't have a "thing." But because she plays it to such universal acclaim, "deadpan" is now her thing. Test it for yourself: Find an article written about her, especially anything written while *Parks* was on the air, that doesn't use that word.

"I don't hate any word," she says slowly, as if scanning her brain for any unsettled feuds with the gang at Merriam-Webster. "It's just not interesting to me anymore."

Of course, she isn't April. April hates people and things, so much so that she once found the upside of losing a pageant to be, "At least I didn't make any new friendships." Plaza, on the other hand, says she and the entire cast were keenly aware they'd found something special in *Parks*.

"I always had moments where I'd forget and complain, but the group of people was so genuine and amazing. Nick Offerman would remind me all the time," she says, now adopting her deepest Offerman voice. "He would be like, 'We're on the best show in television. We're having the best time ever.' And I'd just be like, 'Yes, yes we are.'"

There are flashes of that familiar humor, though. At the mention of Jim O'Heir, whose character Jerry is the punching bag for everything that goes wrong in *Parks*, Plaza shoots back, "Ew, I hate him!" Surely she must feel the slightest twinge of guilt over how much they dumped on the absolute portrait of kindness that is Jim O'Heir, even if it was in character.

"No. He deserved it. It was fun. He liked it."

For a split second, it's hard to tell if she's joking. Her wit is lightning fast, and, unsurprisingly for an improv vet, she commits to the joke a bit longer and a bit better than you do. Later in the conversation, we'd chat about how busy she likes to keep herself: TV, films, guest appearances, side gigs — she and a few friends founded a recreational basketball team called the Pistol Shrimps (Google this right away) — and things you simply don't expect, like an arc as a psychopathic serial killer on *Criminal Minds*. She smiles slightly and arches her eyebrows, but the expression quickly disap-

pears. “That wasn’t me. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She didn’t flinch; I did.

“Being a ‘deadpan’ actor and comedian is harder than people think. Being funny with doing nothing at all is a skill that some people have honed that is really hard,” Plaza says. “There is a lot going on, even though it seems like there’s nothing going on. The frustrating thing about being labeled as ‘deadpan’ is that, for me, April Ludgate was a human being that had so many things going on and motivations for everything she said and did.”

To imbue an emotionally inexpressive, unstable or otherwise unreadable character with complicated layers and palpable humanity is a rare skill that Plaza has honed in addition to her comic timing. If you’re looking for the best example of that nuance, look no further than *Legion*.

Before learning anything about *Legion*, it’s easy to write off. We’ve reached the saturation point with comic-book superhero fare, and even Plaza was hesitant to jump back into television, mainly because she loves making films so much. She didn’t know much about X-Men, although her *Parks* husband turned Marvel leading man Chris Pratt assured her it’s “a special honor to get to play a character in that universe,” one with such positive, genuinely invested fans.

But to call *Legion* a superhero show would do it no justice, and justice isn’t so clear-cut here, anyway. An exploration into the splintered mind of David Haller (Dan Stevens), *Legion* tells the story of the titular X-Men character penned by Chris Claremont and Bill Sienkiewicz in the 1985 comic *New Mutants* #25.

Hawley’s adaptation is visually enthralling, partly because of how much it resembles a ’70s comic book brought to life, with decade-ambivalent costuming, aesthetic hints of Stanley Kubrick and Wes Anderson and surreal doses of David Lynch to boot. Plaza says she, Stevens and *Fargo*’s Rachel Keller, who plays Sydney Barrett — classic rock homages find their way into *Legion*, too — watched *A Clockwork Orange* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* together. While filming, she says they felt like they were in their own “weird, bizzaro Kubrick movie.”

David Haller winds up in Clockworks Psychiatric Hospital because he hears a cacophony of voices, but what the world considers a disorder may, in reality, be a strength he cannot yet harness, an untapped mutant ability to hear and absorb the abilities of others.

“Reality” is a slippery word to associate with *Legion*. Time-lines jump back and forth, characters wander through one another’s minds and alternate dimensions come to light, one of which features a man living in an ice cube. As we plunge further into the depths of David’s mind and begin to discover the unreliability of his own memories, there is a sole constant: Lenny Busker.

In the original script, Lenny was written as a 50-year-old man. When Hawley met Plaza, something about her — to this day she doesn’t know exactly what it was — led him to offer the part to her instead. Plaza, as always, was game.

“We had a funny meeting the first time we met just the two of us because I was on crutches; I had torn my ACL. I was just a mess. He probably thought I was a drug addict in real life and was just like, ‘She’s the one,’” Plaza says. “I remember coming off kind of insane to him, so maybe that was it. That’s one of the reasons why he’s such a genius, because he’s open-minded and gets inspired by such different things.”



He sent her a revised script, to which she replied with one request: Don’t change any of the dialogue or direction to fit a younger, female perspective. Hawley liked the idea. Plaza’s wheels began to turn, and she immediately thought of David Bowie wearing a dress on the cover of *The Man Who Sold the World*.

“There was something about that imagery that stuck with me. I started getting really excited about playing a gender-fluid character and playing kind of a rock-star character,” she says. “I like the idea that Lenny, even though she’s a villain, is fun and has this almost-Beetlejuice energy — evil but delightful. In my mind, in [Lenny’s] mind, in [David’s] mind, she’s a rock star in her own way. I wanted to keep that performative thing going with the character. I think it’s more fun. Someone who’s that evil and that narcissistic, they don’t think of themselves as bad. They’re having a great time.”

And that she does. Lenny grooves through the hallways of Clockworks, clutching her oversized headphones, dishing out optimistic advice to our protagonist, speaking in old-timey phrases and making the occasional crass comment about women, all leftovers from the 50-year-old male Lenny. Her role soon morphs into something far more sinister, to avoid spoilers. In a way, Plaza plays a beast with many heads, giving each a slightly different yet equally unsettling personality of its own.

Her two Sundance films are an about-face, although most any role after Lenny would be. To prepare for her role as a possibly sociopathic nun in *The Little Hours*, Plaza would go back to her hotel room in Vancouver after a day of filming *Legion* and listen to a reading of *The Decameron*, the collection of 14th century Italian novellas in which the movie finds its inspiration, and study the Bible. The latter was familiar to her from her upbringing in an all-girls Catholic school, where she served as a cantor, led mass and participated in church retreats.

“I was tripping out in my head because during the day I was playing Lenny and at night I was reading Bible passages and studying up about 14th century medieval sexual transgression and convent life,” she says with laughter. “I don’t know what I was doing, really.”

The Little Hours has perhaps the weirdest plot summary of any movie this year: A trio of rambunctious medieval nuns (Plaza, Alison Brie and Kate Micucci) rail against the monotony of convent life by pelting the groundskeeper with insults (and, in at least one instance, turnips), spying on one another and seducing the attractive new groundskeeper (Dave Franco).

It’s firmly a comedy, a Monty Python situation, elevated by strong performances from the its dream-team cast, which also includes Molly Shannon, John C. Reilly and Fred Armisen, as well as its use of contemporary language (read: swearing nuns) in what’s otherwise an impressively faithful 14th century Italian backdrop.

It makes no comment on religion itself, but filmmaker Jeff Baena, also Plaza’s longtime boyfriend, wanted to be sure the movie was as contextually and biblically accurate as possible. So, Plaza was given the duty of writing the prayer services. It’s a task she wouldn’t have had if she were only acting in the film. For *The Little Hours* as well as *Ingrid Goes West*, Plaza both starred and served as a producer. Her role on *Ingrid* was more involved: casting, writing, planning, everything in every step of the journey.

“It was so fulfilling for me to be involved from the beginning and to see it through to the end,” she says. “Normally, as an actor you have no control. You show up and do your part and hope for the best. As a producer, you can really put your stamp on something. It was really satisfying for me to have the power to change things.”

This proved to be a greater challenge on comedy-drama *Ingrid Goes West*, a story about an unstable young woman who, still reeling from the death of her mother, uses her inheritance to start over in Los Angeles and befriended an Instagram-famous socialite (Elizabeth Olsen), stalking her newest fixation and stealing her dog to manufacture a reason to meet.

“Psychologically, it was hard for me to be in the space of playing Ingrid and tracking her emotional journey while also thinking, ‘We need more cookies at craft service!’ or whatever was the fuck was happening,” says Plaza, who also felt the exhaustion of being in every scene of the film. “It was a hard but amazing experience, and I would do it again.”

The movie’s spoofs are wonderful, poking plenty of fun of #perfect social media lives, professional “influencers,” ironic art and how much people in L.A. love Joshua Tree. What it also gets right is its portrayal of Ingrid as an actual human being with motivations not so different from our own, not a punchline — a goal she always kept in mind for April, too. Plaza’s affecting portrayal

is at its best when she gets a little dark.

“I never wanted to make a movie that had any kind of moral or social agenda. I never wanted to make a movie that was like, ‘And that’s why you should never go on Instagram!’ because it’s more complicated than that. To me, it’s about connection, human connection,” she says. “It’s about someone who has a hard time connecting with people. That’s such a universal story. I always just wanted it to be about Ingrid wanting a friend and not knowing how to do that.”

Ingrid can flash some serious crazy eyes, but her simple desire for a genuine connection makes her more tragic than anything. She’s lonely, and she has no idea how to fix it. To an extent, Plaza relates.

“I’m surprisingly more shy socially than people would expect. I just turn into my 13-year-old awkward, loser self when I’m trying to make new friends, and I’m not very good at it,” she says.

It’s interesting that she describes herself as shy, because Lenny, Sister Fernanda and Ingrid do have one thing in common: an actor who appears to be utterly unafraid.

“It’s easy for me to be fearless when I’m taking on roles because I don’t have to be myself,” she says. “Being my actual self is more terrifying than anything. Big time.”

There’s pivotal chapter of *Legion* where Lenny embarks on an extended dance sequence to a Bassnectar remix of Nina Simone’s ‘Feeling Good’ in David’s mind, where she has imprisoned him and his friends back at Clockworks, and she’s the sadistic therapist. She writhes, struts and shreds pillows, exerting a chilling yet feminine dominance over David’s psyche.

Her only direction in the script was something like, “Lenny dances a dance of malevolent joy. She rubs her stink all over David’s memories.” On her off hours, she rented a dance studio space and ran around it alone like a little kid, working out what felt right. Filming it, she felt vulnerable and exposed, and the resulting hour screams Emmy nomination.

But doing anything like that in real life? That’s a different story, which is why she describes herself as the worst talk show guest.

“I don’t like to be exposed in that way. I’m actually a more private, personal kind of person,” she says. “I’d rather my work speak for itself than having to talk about it or show people who I am, because half the time I don’t even know. I’m more insecure than my own skin than people would expect.

“I’ll do anything on camera. When I have to be myself and I’m wearing something stupid, it just short-circuits my brain. I don’t know any of these people; no one knows me. Why do they care what I’m doing this summer? None of this is real. It feels empty to me,” she says, her voice full of genuine bewilderment. “I try to have a good attitude about it and just have fun. I don’t want to take everything so seriously, either; that’s lame.”

Uneasiness causes her to act weirder, which is exactly what people expect. It creates a cycle she’s having a tough time breaking.

“Deep down, I know what people want me to do. I know people want me to be weird and do something weird. My defense mechanism is to give people what they want, which isn’t always what I want,” she says. “Then I walk off stage and I feel stupid. I’m like, ‘That isn’t even what I really wanted to do,’ or ‘That’s not even really who I am,’ but I can’t help it. It’s overwhelming sometimes what people project onto you. I’m a very sensitive person; I can feel that energy coming from a mile away.”

To deal with it, she retreats inside of herself. That translates to an audience as boredom or apathy, which is, again, precisely what they expect. Someday she’ll just be herself, she says — as soon as she figures out what that means.

As she looks to the future, she wants to keep challenging herself with completely different roles. Right now, she feels an urge to star in a splashy romantic comedy, like the ones she grew up watching in the ’90s: *One Fine Day*, *While You Were Sleeping* and *When Harry Met Sally* are a few of her favorites. That, or something high-powered. “A lawyer!” she exclaims. “I don’t know.”

Whatever it is, she’ll tackle it with the same all-encompassing commitment she brings to every role; we have no proof of her giving anything less so far. Maybe by the next time we meet, there will be an entirely new connotation to the refrain, “That’s so Aubrey Plaza.”

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